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PERSPECTIVES

Educational reform: Issues and trends

In a recent report on environmentally sustainable development, the World Bank stresses the central role of human resources. It estimates that produced assets account for 16 per cent of global wealth, natural resources for about 20 per cent, and human resources for the largest share.[1] The Bank argues that investment in human resources can be the best means of achieving overall sustainability. While warning against oversimplifying the equation between the development of human capital and educational attainment, its findings imply that a country's future prosperity depends substantially on the quality of education its children receive.

Educational systems around the world are engaged in a process of adjustment. The article by Martin Carnoy in this issue addresses its driving force – structural adjustment. This "Perspective" overviews its more particular manifestations – including changes in educational quality, teachers' remuneration, and the extent of decentralization. Much of the material presented below is drawn from the preparatory reports for the ILO's April 1996 Joint Meeting on the Impact of Structural Adjustment on Educational Personnel, namely *Recent developments in the education sector* (hereinafter, Report I) and *Impact of structural adjustment policies on employment and training of teachers* (hereinafter, Report II). Where other sources have been used, these are given in footnotes.

The global pattern of reform suggests that decentralization is widely seen as a key to a better education because it brings decision-making closer to communities and schools. This is having a profound impact on many crucial issues, down to the level of curricula and teachers' salaries. However, there are significant differences between high- and low-income countries. In the most developed countries decentralization is beginning to realize its potential for enhancing the position of teachers as educational decision-makers, thus sharpening the focus on the quality of teaching (see box). But in lower-income countries decentralization is often linked to reducing the public resources devoted to schooling and does little to strengthen the role of

[1] See World Bank: *Monitoring environmental progress: A report on work in progress* (March 1995 draft). Environment Department. Washington, DC, 1995, pp. 52-53.

Sources of teaching quality

"The nature of good teaching changes in response to new kinds of students, new theories and evidence about human learning, new technologies, and new roles for teachers and schools. This makes policy formulation more difficult because teacher quality is a moving target." The OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation distinguishes three interdependent sources of quality: the individual teacher, the individual school and the external policy environment. In practice, each country's educational policy tends, out of choice or necessity, to be weighted towards one of the three, with the following policy implications:

- Emphasis on the teacher implies rigorous teacher selection procedures, practice-based pre-service teacher training, relatively high remuneration, stimulating career prospects, a school organization that fosters individual autonomy, and a policy environment that is enabling rather than constraining.
- Emphasis on the school implies, inter alia, decentralization of management and budget to the school level, school participation in curriculum decision-making, specificity in policy directives combined with high levels of support and opportunities for schools to experiment and adapt, school-based pre-service teacher training, flexibility in the provision of in-service teacher education and external inspection and advisory services.
- Emphasis on the policy environment implies a clear public mandate for executive action, consultative policy-making procedures, a central inspectorate to monitor individual schools, a central system of teacher evaluation, teacher training that complements the direction of reforms, and central support to assist in implementation.

"Relying on individual teachers seems most viable in settings where teachers are granted reasonably high levels of societal respect and institutional authority ... Relying on central policy to sustain and improve teacher quality implies greater consistency of practice but a slower rate of change. In contrast, relying on individual teachers and schools allows continuous change and experimentation, but also permits some schools and teachers to lag far behind. The big challenge is to improve the terms of this trade-off by channelling together the different sources of teacher quality."

Source: Centre for Educational Research and Innovation: *Quality in teaching*. Paris, OECD, 1994, pp. 113-117.

teachers. Indeed, for many developing countries still battling to improve educational access the primary question is one of resource constraints that still preclude the best, quality-enhancing options.

The following pages attempt to show how different countries have been coping with some of the dilemmas involved in educational reform, mainly at the primary and secondary levels. The issues addressed include educational

quality, funding, teachers' remuneration and class size. The trend towards the decentralization of educational systems is then illustrated by a brief overview of reforms in Latin America, Africa and selected OECD countries since the 1980s. A final section is devoted to Japan and the Asian NICs which, while still regarded as models of highly successful educational planning, are also beginning to face the need for adjustment.

Educational quality: Relevance first?

The quality of education is an elusive concept, difficult to measure by any common standard. Indicators such as repetition and drop-out rates can give some idea of an educational system's success or failure, but their reliability is impaired by financial and administrative factors unrelated to academic achievement. Besides, even though all countries share a common interest in ensuring the academic and social development of their children, their priorities may differ. The more industrialized countries can concentrate on adapting education in order to enhance their competitiveness by helping workforce adjustment to rapid technological development, the information economy, new employment patterns and workplace processes.[2] While the enhancement of competitiveness is an educational goal shared by developing countries as well, the poorest continue to struggle with such basic priorities as literacy and educational access as means of improving public awareness of environmental and health issues, and reducing family size. The disparity of educational needs between countries at different stages of development is highlighted by the data in table 1.

In most cases, however, the current drive for educational quality is a challenge made more difficult by changing social and economic conditions in the context of structural adjustment.[3] Since the 1980s most countries have introduced significant organizational and curricular changes at all stages of education, many of which have served to bring learning closer to work experience and give more emphasis to mathematics, science and technology. In some developing countries, efforts to correct a mismatch between the skills education produces and those in local demand have led some to argue that standard primary and secondary curricula, while suitable for students who go on to university, are largely irrelevant to economic conditions in rural areas and urban slums where most pupils drop out after primary schooling, if not earlier. A common, though controversial argument is that "the way for

[2] OECD: *High quality education and training for all.* Paris, 1992, p. 32. For an illustration of the relation between skills and employment in selected OECD countries, see Chris Freeman, Luc Soete and Umit Efendioglu: "Diffusion and the employment effects of information and communication technology", in *International Labour Review* (Geneva), 1995, Vol. 134, No. 4-5, p. 597, figure 3.

[3] See, for example, Robert E. B. Lucas: "The impact of structural adjustment on training needs", in *International Labour Review* (Geneva), 1994, Vol. 133, No. 5-6, pp. 677-694; and the article by Martin Carnoy in this issue.

Table 1. Selected education indicators

	Estimated adult illiteracy rate (15 years and over)				Average years of schooling (adults aged 25+)		Distribution of enrolment by level of education (%)			Gross enrolment ratio at tertiary level [1]				Estimated annual population increase in 0-24 age group		Under-5 mortality rate (‰)	Public educational expenditure per capita (US$)		GNP per capita (US$)
	1980		1995		1990		1993			1980		1993		1970-90	1990-2000	1992	1980	1993	1992
	M	F	M	F	M	F	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	M	F	M	F						
World	23	38	16	29	5	4	60	33	8	13	11	17	14	1.4	0.8	85	129	229	4 440
Developed countries	2	5	1	2	10	9	37	45	18	36	36	45	50	–0.1	–0.4	15	500	1 089	15 500
Developing countries	31	53	21	38	–	–	66	29	6	6	4	11	7	1.8	1.0	–	32	43	–
Sub-Saharan Africa	48	71	33	53	2	1	79	19	2	3	1	5	2	2.9	2.9	159	41	28	800
Arab States	45	74	32	56	4	2	63	32	6	13	6	17	10	2.8	2.1	87	109	116	4 400
Latin America/ Caribbean	18	23	12	15	6	5	71	22	7	16	12	18	18	1.7	0.9	50	95	143	2 690
East Asia/Oceania	20	42	9	24	5	4	67	29	4	4	2	9	6	1.1	–0.3	65	12	28	2 650
South Asia	47	76	37	63	4	2	61	35	4	6	2	12	5	2.1	1.5	133	13	12	570

[1] This ratio is calculated by dividing total enrolment at this level (universities and other higher educational institutions) by the population of the age group within the 5 years following the end of secondary education.

Source: UNESCO: *Statistical yearbook 1995*. Paris, 1995, Tables 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, 2.10 and 2.11; and *Education for all: Status and trends/1994* (Paris), 1994, p. 26. Data may not add up to totals because of rounding.

low-income countries to prepare for the future relatively efficiently and equitably is to increase the quality of primary and secondary general education and to focus vocational education and training on immediately applicable skills for self-employment in agriculture, crafts and light industrial production, and commerce, as well as for employment in education and health services." [4] Accordingly, in many developing countries primary-school curricula now emphasize "skills that pupils would use to solve problems related to water resources, sanitation, health and nutrition, and food preservation, to organize productive activities, such as cooperatives for farmers or fishermen, and to improve simple technology for making such things as charcoal, fish nets and fish pens." [5]

On the other hand, in many developing countries, the spectacular educational progress of the past few decades is giving way to concern with the extent to which education and training "form a part of a national integrated system of enhancing technological capabilities . . . To compete in the world industrial economy, it is essential to have higher educational institutions, scientists, technologists and engineers. Universal primary and secondary education is a worthy goal in its own right, but alone it does not provide the wherewithal to compete in the international market." [6] The substantial gap between developing and developed countries as regards tertiary-level enrolment is illustrated by the gross enrolment ratios given in table 1.

In the industrialized countries, whose societies are increasingly dominated by information and knowledge, the strategic focus of educational reform is on the development of lifelong learning as a means of reducing unemployment and raising the qualifications of a large proportion of the workforce with serious limitations in literacy skills. "Although completion rates from initial schooling have increased since the 1980s, about 15 to 20 per cent of young persons in OECD countries still leave school with no qualification. Strategies for combating school failure have focused on diversifying upper secondary education to meet a wider spectrum of learning needs and student preferences." [7] As part of a longer-term, preventive strategy, however, increasing attention is also being devoted to pre-school and early childhood development programmes. "The evidence suggests that early childhood interventions of high quality can pay large dividends later on." [8] Accordingly, together with primary and secondary education, such programmes are now seen as crucial to laying the foundations for lifelong learning. From this perspective, the role of these basic stages of education is to equip people for the continuous process of skill adjustment required by

[4] Martin Carnoy: "Efficiency and equity in vocational education and training policies", in *International Labour Review* (Geneva), 1994, Vol. 133, No. 2, p. 239.

[5] United Nations: *Report on the world social situation, 1993*. New York, 1993, p. 55.

[6] Ajit Singh: "Global economic changes, skills and international competitiveness", in *International Labour Review* (Geneva), 1994, Vol. 133, No. 2, p. 180.

[7] OECD: *The OECD Jobs Study: Implementing the strategy*. Paris, 1995, p. 30.

[8] ibid.

rapidly changing labour market demands. The importance of these issues is reflected in the priority they were accorded at the OECD's January 1996 Meeting of Education Ministers. Other concerns high on the Meeting's agenda included "improving the transitions and pathways between education and work . . .; the transition from school to work and higher education; and . . . roles and responsibilities of all partners – including governments and the learners themselves – in implementing and financing opportunities for lifelong learning." [9]

A question of resources

Countries reforming their educational systems also face distinct resource constraints (see table 1). Although some governments in Latin America, Africa and Asia spent over a fifth of their budgets on education in the early 1990s (as against an OECD average of 12 per cent in 1992), the chasm between high- and low-income countries continues to widen. Public educational expenditure per capita in the developed countries (most OECD countries, the former USSR, Israel and South Africa) nearly doubled in the period 1985-92, reaching an average US$828. Although a similar rate of increase was observed in the developing countries, the average per capita figure at the end of the period was only US$49; in sub-Saharan Africa it was a mere US$28, down a third from its 1980 level. Given recent demographic trends, the difference between high- and low-income countries is even greater in terms of spending per student actually enrolled (Report I, pp. 3-4).

Since the 1980s most economically hard-hit developing countries, especially in Africa and Latin America, have had to increase their reliance on private contributions to educational costs (cost recovery) and/or reduce teachers' pay (the largest item of educational expenditure). Less indebted countries of South Asia have increased the number of pupils per teacher (increased teacher productivity), while also increasing teachers' salaries. But most countries in Asia, the OECD countries and a few others (e.g. Botswana and Colombia) have not only expanded educational access, but also increased teachers' salaries and reduced class size, although even these countries engaged in cost recovery, especially at the tertiary level (Report II, p. 35).

Teachers' remuneration

Teachers' pay relative to salaries in other professions is crucial in determining the quality of individuals attracted to teaching. In most countries, however, teachers are typically government employees trained according to government-set requirements. Both the demand for and supply of teachers –

[9] OECD: Background note on OECD Meeting of Education Ministers, Paris, 16-17 Jan. 1996. SG/COM/NEWS(96)3. Paris, 1996, p. 3.

and therefore their salaries – are largely determined by government educational spending and regulatory policies. Although there are enormous variations between countries as regards qualification requirements and pay scales and structure, teachers' salaries are generally set on the basis of formal educational qualifications and years of teaching experience. Teachers' pay in private schools tends to follow the government rate.

Table 2 shows that in countries for which information is available on teachers' wages relative to average wages, teachers' relative incomes generally declined in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Togo, the United Kingdom, the United States and Zimbabwe being exceptions among the countries shown in table 2). But, whereas in the OECD countries and many Asian countries teachers' real incomes increased over this period, in Africa and Latin America they generally declined, particularly in those developing countries which cut public spending or increased access to education without increasing the budget for education (Report II, p. 51).

The sharp declines in teachers' real salaries in most Latin American and African countries can generally be attributed to these countries' very poor economic performance in the 1980s. But teachers' salaries dropped disproportionately relative to average wages in many of these countries, which suggests that the structural adjustment programmes implemented over that period may have taken the view that teachers (along with other public employees) were overpaid (Report II, p. 51). In Latin America in particular, high indebtedness and reductions in international lending resulted in major drops in real wages for all categories of workers in the 1980s. But where governments found it politically possible to do so, they held teachers' salaries down longer, as part of the drive to reduce public spending. In Mexico, for example, by 1988 teachers' salaries had fallen by 78 per cent compared to the beginning of the decade, as against 55 per cent for the public sector as a whole. In Chile, teachers' salaries fell at double the rate of manufacturing wages in the second half of the decade (but then rose with the return to democracy in the 1990s).

A similar though less consistent pattern can be observed in many African countries, sometimes also with a relative decline as against manufacturing wages (e.g. Burundi, Kenya, Mauritius, Zimbabwe). However, teachers tend to have some political influence in African countries, making it difficult to implement measures that directly reduce their income or employment. Moreover, in a number of countries there have been questions as to whether teachers should be included in civil service reform efforts or not. None the less, budget cuts have often pushed salaries down – though generally not as drastically as in Latin America – and sometimes resulted in non-payment of salaries for extended periods (e.g. for nine months in Benin in 1988) (Report II, p. 55).

In many developing countries, especially in Latin America, secondary-school teachers experienced a sharper drop in real salaries than did their

Table 2. Changes in primary teachers' pay relative to average wages 1980s-90s

	Index	1985	1986	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
Africa									
Botswana	1979=100						54		
Central African Republic	1981=100				75				
Ghana	1981=100					67			
Malawi	1980=100	145			89				
Mauritius	1981=100	55				78			
Togo	1980=100			105					
Zimbabwe	1980=100	61					100		
Latin America									
Argentina	1980=100	77						58	
Chile	1982=100	120						52	
Costa Rica	1983=100	79		77		91			
Mexico	1981=100	83		39			47		
Asia									
Hong Kong	1982=100		94				102		
Korea, Republic of	1978=100		96		87				
Central Europe									
Hungary	1983=100	100		93				96	
Poland	1980=100	103				131		111	
Russian Federation	1980=100	97		97					70
OECD countries									
Australia (New South Wales)	1980=100	94		90		88			
Belgium	1985=100	100						82	
Denmark	1985=100	100							96
Germany	1985=100	100						98	
Greece	1985=100	100					96		
Italy	1985=100	100						108	
Japan	1985=100	100							101
Netherlands	1985=100	100						96	
Sweden	1985=100	100						95	
United Kingdom	1985=100	100						125	
United States	1980=100	114		121				126	

Source: Report II, pp. 48-49, table 9.

primary-school colleagues, reflecting much larger cuts (or smaller increases) in spending per pupil in secondary schools. In Costa Rica, for example, in the three years from 1979 to 1982 teachers' salaries fell an average 27 per cent at the primary level and 39 per cent at the secondary level. The strategy of severely reducing teachers' pay cannot but have a negative impact on

teachers' morale and possibly on their recruitment, especially where starting salaries are falling relative to other occupations (Report II, p. 54). This has indeed happened in a number of countries (e.g. Algeria, Barbados, Belize, Suriname, Zambia) where the minimum rates from pre-primary up to secondary level have declined alarmingly (Report I, p. 55).

Some high-income countries also have relatively low starting salaries for teachers. Starting salaries in primary and lower secondary schools are below per capita GDP in Sweden and the United States and just about equal to per capita GDP in Austria, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom. A 1988 survey of teachers' salaries in a sample of European Community countries found that starting primary-school teachers earned consistently less than non-manual industrial workers and, in half the countries surveyed, less than manual workers.[10] In most OECD countries, however, the relative unattractiveness of starting salaries is at least partly offset by the prospect of significantly higher earnings later on in teachers' careers, with maximum salaries ranging from 1.5 to 3.7 times per capita GDP (Norway and Sweden are exceptions) (Report I, pp. 56 and 65).

The brighter side to this generally pessimistic picture is that many countries – especially those that have been increasing their economic output – are also raising teachers' salaries. In Uganda, where teachers were among the lowest paid in Africa, their monthly salaries have increased from US$8 to 47 since 1990 and are scheduled to continue to rise. A similar trend can be observed in Benin (Report II, p. 54). This is also the case in Argentina, Chile, Hong Kong, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, Singapore and Turkey. But even in these countries – except Hong Kong and Turkey – and in many OECD countries, teachers' salaries are not increasing as rapidly as manufacturing wages. Thus, even where teachers' real salaries are rising, they may not be rising rapidly enough to attract or maintain high-quality personnel in the teaching profession (Report II, p. 54).

Class size: The smaller the better?

Another critical factor in the attractiveness of the teaching profession is class size, which has an important impact on the amount and intensity of teachers' work. Moreover, class size, like teachers' pay, is a key parameter in the policy-making equation that determines how resources are used to meet educational access and quality targets. While the relation between class size and educational quality remains controversial, it is significant that as countries get richer they tend to have lower pupil/teacher ratios. In the 1980s pupil/teacher ratios generally continued to decline in middle- and high-income countries, but increased in a few low-income countries (Report II, p. 57), especially in Africa.

[10] See Centre for Educational Research and Innovation: *Measuring the quality of schools*. Paris, OECD, 1995, p. 72.

Since 1990 trends have been less clear, with patterns reflecting not only educational policies and cost factors but also demographic changes. Average class size in primary schools is on the rise in a number of high-income OECD countries, thus reversing a trend going back more than three decades. They nevertheless remain, along with those in the transition economies of central and eastern Europe, among the lowest in the world, somewhere in the range of 18-25 pupils per class. High- and middle-income countries typically apply a maximum standard of around 30 at primary level (e.g. 30 in Austria, Bahrain, Czech Republic and Malta, 25 in Portugal and Spain, 28 in Denmark and Norway).

Decentralization: The global trend?

Decentralization has been a key feature of recent educational reforms in many countries. Governments favouring this option typically implement a system of bloc grants for social (or educational) spending to local authorities, which are then responsible for supplementing these grants with local resources through tax revenues or private sources and for deciding how to spend funds to meet local needs. In principle, decentralization is intended to make the educational system more flexible and responsive to actual needs by giving local authorities, schools, teachers and parents more say in educational decision-making. This has heightened interest in a wider choice of schooling options between private and public schools, and diversification within public education in OECD and some middle-income countries.

Most OECD countries have indeed decentralized much decision-making either to the school level or to a combination of the school and local-authority levels (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States). School-based decisions typically concern the organization of instruction (school choice, instruction time, textbooks, teaching methods and assessment of regular pupil work) and/or planning and structures (opening/closing schools, programme and curriculum choice and examinations/credentials) (Report I, pp. 7-8).

Although it is still too early to assess the impact of the changes under way in the middle-income countries of central and eastern Europe, the shift in ideas governing the management and financing of their educational systems has been momentous (Report I, p. 8). In some cases, this has led to greater decision-making on recruitment and salary levels at school level. In others, decentralization has been taken much further. For example, the Russian Federation's July 1992 Education Act leaves local education authorities completely free to decide on teaching methods, curricula and textbooks, provided that graduation examinations meet minimum government standards. Private, municipal and cooperative educational institutions are now allowed to operate alongside the state system. School

funding has been reorganized on the basis of an index-linked government grant per student – including in private schools – to be supplemented by appropriations from local authorities, fee-charging and tax-deductible grants from enterprises.[11]

In practice, however, decentralization often implies a degree of privatization. A distinction must therefore be drawn between countries that decentralize their educational system for increased flexibility in education itself and those where decentralization is primarily a means of reducing the central government's administrative and, especially, financial responsibility for educational expansion and quality. Indeed, in many developing countries decentralization has simply meant fewer funds for education in poorer regions, hence a widening gap in quality between the rich and the poor. In what follows, highlights are given of decentralization in Latin America, Africa and some OECD countries. The ILO reports provide considerable detail on these and other regions.

Latin America: Time for second-generation reforms?

In Latin America, a region previously characterized by highly centralized educational systems except in federal states such as Brazil, decentralization of some management decisions has gradually been introduced, either to regional and local levels (e.g. Uruguay) or to school level (e.g. Peru). However, in most of the countries that decentralized their systems in the late 1970s and 1980s (Argentina, Chile and Colombia, beginning in 1989), these reforms largely failed to achieve their stated objectives. In retrospect, decentralization appears to have been carried out as part of a budget-cutting exercise, without adequate attention to the necessary accompanying measures (e.g. supervision, teacher selection and participation in decision-making, etc.). Moreover, local government resources proved insufficient to offset the cut in central government funding, although decentralization *per se* does not seem to have been the cause of the sharp drop in teachers' salaries that occurred at the same time.

A document published by the Chilean Ministry of Education in 1994 argued that the "municipalization" of education begun in 1980 had not produced higher quality or greater equity and had failed to allow for the participation of either the community or teachers in educational decision-making on account of the exclusionary and arbitrary nature of the decentralization process. Moreover, it had resulted in wasteful and inefficient resource allocation by the municipalities while depriving the central Government of the capability to correct disparities and distortions in

[11] For further details on reforms in Russia's educational system and on difficulties in their implementation, see "Bridging the gap between yesterday's skills and tomorrow's needs in the Russian Federation", in *International Labour Review* (Geneva), 1994, Vol. 133, No. 2, pp. 264-274.

the educational system. The democratically elected Government in power since 1990 has endeavoured to strengthen the participation of teachers and local communities by democratizing municipal elections, redefining public and private responsibilities for management and funding, putting an end to the hiring of uncertified teachers and restoring the right of teachers to bargain collectively and to strike (Report II, pp. 65-68). However, decentralization itself is not being called into question. The municipal councils remain the ultimate arbiter of educational policy in local schools.

In Argentina also, decentralization is being strengthened, not abandoned, despite the poor performance of the educational system in recent years. Following the decentralization of primary education in the early 1980s, a second round of decentralization in the early 1990s transferred secondary education to the jurisdiction of the provinces. The poor performance of Argentinian schools, marked by low completion rates of primary and secondary education, especially in the poorer provinces outside Buenos Aires, has been attributed in part to the large numbers of part-time teachers and the employment of many teachers working shorter hours for low pay. The Government has identified weak and non-focused teacher training as another major factor (Report II, p. 68).

Reviewing the situation in Latin America at the end of 1994, after a decade and a half of reform, Sebastian Edwards, the World Bank's chief economist for the Latin America and Caribbean Region, described the average quality of primary education in Latin America as "dismal", stressing the need for "second-generation" reforms. According to a 1992 study on mathematics and science education, the test performance of 13-year-olds from Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela was in most cases significantly below that of Asian countries such as Thailand. Only Mozambican students recorded lower test scores than Brazilian students. Edwards argues that

> the limited coverage of Latin American education systems, their lack of emphasis on science and technology, and their generally low quality stand in the way of improved productivity ... Improving the quality of education will require strengthening management, reallocating education resources, an increase in funding and making teachers accountable – especially to parents. In many cases it will also mean decentralizing education, giving a greater role to the private sector. Teachers should be trained using modern techniques, their skills periodically renewed and their salaries set according to performance.[12]

This prescription, however, is not universally endorsed. Alternative approaches are suggested in Report II (see, for example, Chapter 5, pp. 103-112, and also the article by Martin Carnoy in this issue).

[12] Sebastian Edwards: "Labour and education key to growth", in *Financial Times* (London), 6 Dec. 1994.

Africa: The uphill struggle continues

In Africa decentralization was a common theme in the institution-building efforts that accompanied structural adjustment in the 1980s and into the 1990s. In the education sector, however, decentralization programmes often failed to take account of the lack of personnel and financial management skills at the local level. This was compounded by the weakness of supervisory and planning capability which frustrated rationalization generally (Report II, p. 55) and exacerbated by the effects of structural adjustment programmes and reduced public spending. As a result, the state of education in many African countries remains alarming. During the 1980s, overall enrolment in primary education in Africa grew by 2.2 per cent per year, whereas the school-age population continued to increase by more than 3 per cent. In over a dozen African countries enrolment declined in absolute terms in the late 1980s. Forty per cent of primary-school pupils fail to reach the final year. Repetition rates, estimated to average 23 per cent in the first grade of primary education, are higher in Africa than in any other region of the world. Data on Swaziland show that children from a poor rural background take an average of 12 years to complete the seven-year primary curriculum and that nearly half do not finish.[13] In Africa, generally, the gender gap remains wide: two-thirds of girls get no secondary education and adult illiteracy is over 60 per cent among women as compared with 40 per cent among men.[14]

Increasingly widespread fee-charging contributes to the decline in enrolment and the high dropout rates in many countries, but another important reason is the changing public perception of schooling. With the reduction of state bureaucracies and rising urban unemployment, school is no longer seen as a reliable stepping stone to a career in the public service. The continuing economic crisis is also an obstacle to progress in gender equity. Increasingly, girls are supporting their families as boys migrate to cities in search of work. A study in Uganda found that the poorest parents were withdrawing their children from schools, starting with daughters, because fees had risen.[15]

Nevertheless, decentralization is likely to remain on the agenda as a means of achieving greater relevance to local needs. According to the director of UNESCO's Basic Education Division, "countries are looking for ways to provide education for all through vehicles that transcend the formal

[13] Sue Armstrong: "The obstacle course", in *New Scientist* (London), Vol. 148, No. 1998, 7 Oct. 1995, p. 59.

[14] UNESCO: *Education for All 2000* (Paris), No. 17, Oct.-Dec. 1994, p. 3. For a detailed study of gender issues and schooling in Africa, see also Adhiambo Odaga and Ward Heneveld: *Girls and schools in sub-Saharan Africa: From analysis to action*. World Bank Technical Paper No. 298. Washington, DC, 1995, World Bank.

[15] UNESCO: op. cit., p. 4. See also Odaga and Heneveld: op. cit., pp. 15-18.

or non-formal models, and that are village- or community-based".[16] In Ethiopia, for example, the Ministry of Education is proposing to convert every school into a "community learning centre", offering primary education, literacy and vocational training around a common core curriculum. In Mali where 80 per cent of rural children have never been to school, the Ministry of Basic Education has proposed an alternative strategy for the expansion of basic education: "It is essential for the traditional beneficiaries (that is, the communities, parents and children) to be seen also as the decision-makers, to accept them as such and, in so doing, give them the room they need to manage the education system".[17] Generally, a curriculum relevant to the lives of children and taught by well-trained teachers from the community is now seen as a key component of successful educational reform. Curricula are being adapted to community needs, especially in the field of science. For example, in Zimbabwe the primary-school curriculum covers pest control, animal diseases and agricultural productivity.[18]

However, the attractiveness of using locally-recruited teachers and specially designed curricula to improve educational access and enrolment has to be seen in the light of the risks posed by the creation of what may amount to a "less formal" system of education operating alongside the conventional system. The key question is whether such strategies – by reducing teachers' qualification standards – create trade-offs between short-term access and long-term quality objectives. "Reducing qualification standards, and consequently depressing salary levels, flies in the face of conventional wisdom on the sustainable requirements for recruitment, retention and motivation of good teachers ... The assumption that there may be alternative sources of motivation (locally based staff) may only be short term if salaries remain below national norms" (Report I, pp. 41-42).

Europe, Australia, United States: Empowered teachers and wider choice

A number of European countries decentralized their educational systems in the 1980s and early 1990s. In almost every case – including the United Kingdom and, later, Sweden with conservative governments in power – these reforms led to increased teacher participation in decision-making at the local government and school levels. In addition, teachers' financial and working conditions generally improved as a result of the increasing importance attached to education in preparing the labour force for the new information economy. Funding for primary and secondary education was increased, although most governments attempted to implement cost recovery at the university level. An important factor in shaping educational

[16] UNESCO: op. cit., p. 4.

[17] ibid., p. 5.

[18] ibid., pp. 3-4.

reforms in this group of countries was the presence of strong teachers' unions and long-standing traditions of participation in decision-making through collective bargaining and national arbitration structures.

In Sweden, beginning in the early 1990s, the municipalities received a general government grant covering all fields of municipal activity, including health services, day care and primary and secondary schooling. This was accompanied by decentralization of authority to hire, dismiss, pay and supervise teachers and other school staff. Although the central Government still controls the goals and guidelines of all educational activities, these are much less detailed and strict than they used to be. Teachers' unions consider this added flexibility as the most positive aspect of the reform since it gives them and all those affected by school activities a greater say in decision-making both at the municipal level and in individual schools. However, while confirming that teachers' job-satisfaction has often increased as a result of clearer work goals, increasing teacher leverage over the work environment, and better cooperation within schools, a recent study stresses that problems remain. These include "increased levels of stress, greater competition between schools, levels of cooperation between teachers, students and parents which remain underdeveloped, limited teacher input in determining school monetary policy, an insufficient sense of purpose of work among teachers, decreased status of the teaching profession, and lack of confidence in local politicians responsible for schools." [19]

France's 1983 decentralization reform greatly increased the decision-making powers of municipalities over pre-primary and primary schools and those of departments and regions over secondary schools. Central government funding for these schools increased by 2.5 per cent annually in real terms over the 1980s and teachers have assumed a much more active role in developing school working plans together with other educational staff and outside partners. Furthermore, teachers' unions were also successful in influencing the course of educational reforms in the 1980s in matters such as teacher training and equalization of conditions between primary- and secondary-school teachers, though the unions' strength has declined somewhat since the early 1990s. In contrast to Sweden's decentralization of authority over the employment and status of teachers, however, France has maintained central control over these functions.

In several states of Australia, a centralized decision-making structure at state level began to give way to a combination of regional, local and school-based decision-making in the 1980s. Objectives include reducing government expenditure on education, the introduction of market-like incentives in schools and greater authority for school principals.

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[19] Roger Ellmin: *Job satisfaction and decentralization: The effects of systemic change on Swedish comprehensive school teachers from 1988 to 1993.* Sectoral Activities Programme Working Paper, SAP 4.30/WP.80. Geneva, 1995, ILO, p. 1.

Under the United States' highly decentralized system of education, property and state income taxes pay for almost all public schooling. Thus the slow growth of federal government social spending in the 1980s had a relatively small impact on the ability of teachers' unions to negotiate higher salaries and more money for schools in general. Such decentralization has also meant enormous variation from state to state (even from one school district to another) in the role that teachers have played in educational reform. Yet, experiments in school districts of many states have yielded innovations in organization, curricula, budgeting and staffing, which indicate that teachers support school-based management and feel it improves schools. Generally, however, their support for decentralized management has also depended on respect for collective bargaining arrangements (see Report II, pp. 71-73).

In South Carolina, for example, a state-wide initiative in the early 1990s rewarded schools materially for organizing innovative programmes that led to improved achievement scores. This initiative was highly successful in empowering teachers and school administrators to make changes at school level. In New Mexico, although teachers cannot bargain collectively, the Santa Fe school district has implemented a school-based management plan in which teachers in various schools are responsible for organizing new pedagogical approaches and curricula to meet what teachers and parents perceived as the pupils' needs. Such practices are likely to become more widespread in response to mounting pressure for more parental say in how children are educated. Growing numbers of parents are indeed rejecting public schooling altogether and are either unable or unwilling to pay for private education for their children. As a result nearly 500,000 children – 1 per cent of the school-age population – were being taught at home in 1994 as compared with only about 15,000 in the early 1980s.[20] Such figures are additional proof, if any were needed, of the growing demand for a wider range of educational options, both generally and within the public sector itself.

Japan and the NICs: Towards adjustment of a model?

Japan's educational system was until recently the subject of unconditional praise for its role in the country's economic success. Internationally, it is still widely regarded as a model that countries like Brazil, China and others could emulate to help them catch up with the world's industrial leaders.[21] The experience of the Asian NICs proves the point. The Republic of Korea, a shining example of the model's successful

[20] Michael Prowse: "Market v. state in education", in *Financial Times* (London), 16 May 1994.

[21] See Chris Freeman: "New technology and catching up", in *European Journal of Development Research* (London), Vol. 1, No. 1, June 1989.

application, now has an annual output of graduate engineers higher than Japan's, and economic performance to match.

The Republic of Korea's modern economic development, like Japan's, was possible because of "a sustained process of upgrading 'social capability' for absorbing advanced technology from industrially more developed economies".[22] Education played and continues to play a critical role in this process: from nearly 80 per cent illiteracy in 1945, Korea had achieved virtually universal primary education by 1964. This created a pool of labour "capable of short-term on-the-job training ... as demands for semi-skilled labour increased with the rapid pace of industrialization that began in the 1960s".[23] A similar pattern can be observed in Taiwan (China), where education is estimated to have accounted directly for at least 25 per cent of growth in total factor productivity (TFP) between 1951 and 1990 and to have contributed – through the creation of a skilled labour force – to a further 25 per cent of TFP growth attributed to the use of foreign technology.[24] As in the cases of Japan and the Republic of Korea, the educational system of Taiwan (China) has since the 1950s been planned and administered by a strong central Government (in this case under martial law until September 1986) to serve the needs of industrialization and overall economic development policy, successfully exploiting successive shifts in comparative advantage.

Since the 1980s, however, the importance of education in Taiwan's growth has been slowly declining.[25] The main reasons for this decline include the economy's structural transformation from labour-intensive to capital-intensive activities, but also a qualitative change in its research and development needs – away from reverse engineering of imported technology towards development of domestic capacity for technological innovation. Accordingly, the National Council for Science of Taiwan (China) has been entrusted with the task of trying to use education to increase the number and quality of personnel in research.[26] Given the strong parallel between the development experience of the Asian NICs and that of Japan and the similar role of education in both cases, it is not surprising that these countries should eventually, if not already, face challenges similar to those now confronting Japan.

Indeed, in Japan itself criticism of the educational system's rigidity is beginning to surface as the economy adjusts to the new challenges ahead. Although the Federation of Employers' Organizations (Nikkeiren) and

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[22] Chung H. Lee: *The economic transformation of South Korea: Lessons for the transition economies*. Paris, OECD, 1995, p. 21.

[23] ibid.

[24] Sébastien Dessus, Jia-Dong Shea and Mau-Shan Shi: *Chinese Taipei: The origins of the "economic miracle"*. Paris, OECD, 1995, pp. 124-125.

[25] ibid., p. 39, fig. 3.2.

[26] ibid., p. 46.

other business organizations played an active part in shaping the present system in the 1960s, business leaders now argue that Japan is losing competitiveness because its educational system encourages students to memorize rather than indulge in creative thought.[27] It is geared to creating disciplined, quality labourers in accordance with the country's traditional industrial strategy of maximizing the contribution of the lower levels of the workforce. Another criticism is that the system focuses too much on equality, thereby threatening to stifle the creativity of talented students. "In 'creative' industries, such as software and media, which are booming in the West, Japan is way behind, isolated by language and hampered by a conformist educational system." [28]

However, there are signs that, like elsewhere in the industrialized world, education in Japan is set to become more individualized in the future. For example, the Ministry of Education and the country's leading universities are already implementing a programme which allows high-school students excelling in maths and physics to attend courses taught by university lecturers. The aim of the programme is to allow the most promising students to escape the constraints of the uniform system and the pressures of competition for admission to university. As attitudes towards conformity change, pressure for deeper reforms along these lines is likely to grow, coming from society as a whole.[29]

To conclude

This perspective, while drawing heavily on the two ILO reports cited throughout these pages, has given only selected highlights of the data and findings they contain. Given the wealth of information contained in these comprehensive documents, they cannot but be strongly recommended for further reading.

[27] Emiko Terazono: "Reform needed for a more competitive Japan", in *Financial Times* (London), 6 Dec. 1994.

[28] *The Economist* (London), Vol. 338, No. 7948, 13 Jan. 1996, p. 63.

[29] Emiko Terazono, op. cit.